

God and religion

by Bart Nooteboom

13. Which God?

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Do I believe in God? The question is difficult to answer because there are at least three different notions of God.

First, the God of the philosophers. Here God is mostly the ‘prime or unmoved mover’, who created the world. Without God as the designer, how could all the complex forms of life have arisen? Now of course we know from evolutionary theory that they can have evolved on the basis of random trials, selection and transmission of what survives. For Spinoza God was not even a prime mover but simply the whole system of nature.

Second, the God for the people, supplied by Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religion. People desperately need God as a higher power that transcends the sorrow, mortality and fragility of human life on earth. He is provident, has an intention for humanity. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and benevolent, deals out ultimate justice, and guarantees morality by the threat and promise of a hereafter. For a long time, philosophers also deemed belief in God necessary for morality.

With this God there is the insoluble problem of evil, of the justice of God (*theodicy*). If God is all-powerful etc., how can he allow the blatant injustice and cruelty of natural and human disasters? The answer is that even those have a hidden purpose, known only to God. No matter how bad the world seems, it is the best of all possible worlds. In this way one can rationalize any evil on the grounds that it could have been worse.

Third, the God of the mystics. God is not ‘out there’ but ‘in here’, to be found by delving into the self, aided by asceticism and training by spiritual leaders. God cannot be rationalized. Holy texts do not explain but evoke personal religious feeling. We find mysticism in all three world religions: Meister Eckart and Thomas a Kempis, for example, in Christendom, the Jewish Kabala, and Islamic Sufism. They all tended to be persecuted because the clergy could not tolerate the elimination of their role.

So, do I believe in God? The mystic God would be my favorite. But I am an agnostic: If God is what he is to be, then all we can say about Him is there is nothing we can say about Him, not even that He does *not* exist. He transcends all human understanding. However, mystical delving into the self is unreliable. Introspection may be a surrender to delusion, and we need some external check of that.

I wish there were a God. Perhaps God exists in that wish, and one can pray to that wishful being. But the only hereafter is what we leave behind after our life, in the life of others. Life is a unique gift, and it can flourish in contributing to that hereafter. Perhaps we can muster the courage to think that is enough.

14. Religion without a God

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The human being has a religious drive towards *transcendence*, a rising above the self. That can be but is not necessarily oriented towards a god. In its evolution, human society also needed God as a kind of policeman, to compel people to behave towards each other, on pain of damnation. Now we have regular police and laws for maintaining order, and for that we may no longer need God. But the religious thirst for transcendence remains.

The etymology of ‘religion’ is contested. According to one view it derives from the Latin ‘religare’, connecting, with a tie of the human being to something divine or higher than the self that is ‘holy’, cannot be fully grasped and is awesome, inspires admiration and instills modesty. Transcendence does not imply that there ‘is something’ for the self beyond life, it can be ‘immanent’, part of life, though in life one can aim beyond it, to the life of others and to what one leaves behind after life.

The higher can be the whole or part of nature, such as spirits of rivers, mountains, forests, as with the American Indians, or the gods of the classical Greeks, carousing on mount Olympus, spirits of ancestors that intervene in the world, or, ominously, national spirit or character, revived in present populistic nationalism.

Robert Bellah spoke of a ‘civil religion’ in the US, in an American cultural and political tradition, with sacralization of symbols. The sociologist Durkheim proposed human rights as a new religion. The idea of a civil religion or religion of the state goes back to Rousseau, in his book on the social contract. With Schopenhauer, in aesthetic contemplation the self can momentarily escape the relentless drive of the will. Here we have art as religion. For Friedrich Schiller also art was the replacement of religion.

Emmanuel Levinas sought transcendence in the relation between self and other. He rejected traditional notions of God. After the holocaust, the murder of his family by the Nazis, Stalin, Pol Pot, Ruanda and the like, that idea no longer has any credibility. Yet the tone of Levinas is religious. He still talks about God but not in any usual sense. Levinas allows only for some *non-ontological* notion of God, not as something that exists. There can be no comprehension of God; we cannot have direct access to him, but ‘we hear his voice’ in the relation between self and other. Levinas said, somewhat paradoxically, that this is all that survives after the death of God. In a sense, the other has replaced God. So, perhaps we can say that Levinas is offering a ‘religion of the other’, in a link of the self to the other who is higher than the self. Now it is the other human being who inspires wonder, admiration, and awe. The beauty of this is that the religious source of awe for the other now coincides with morality. The vertical transcendence to God is replaced by a horizontal transcendence from human being to human being.

115. The success of theistic religion

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How have theistic religions, such as Christianity and the Islam, been so successful, persisting for so long?

My hunch is that this is because of a clever combination of the universal, eternal, pure, and Platonic, in a single God, or Allah, with the individual, specific, diverse, earthly, fragile, weak and human, in the form of a saviour or prophet, a Christ or Mohammed. Christ succumbs in suffering but is resurrected, re-connected with the eternal, and by his suffering offers the gift of salvation. The human need for recognition of earthly nuance, plurality, individuality, the tragedy of contingency, and softness of compassion is satisfied but remains connected to the pure and transcendent, is reabsorbed in celestial universality and eternity.

Then, if that is correct, what about other religions or philosophies, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism? They lacked the one or the other: the absolute and universal or the individual, the earthly nuance. Buddhism and Confucianism are wisdoms of life that have no absolutes of God. Taoism, by contrast, is oriented not to human tribulations but to the system of nature as a whole, in its harmony and perfection. As such it is like the God of Spinoza. It lacks nuance and tragic individuality.

The histories of these wisdoms are patchy, with intermissions and shifts, a thinning out, and their survival was precarious.

In attempts at synthesis between them, as in forms of neo-confucianism in China, is there a perspective for forging a unity of the supreme and absolute with earthly contingency, justice and individuality?

Totalitarian ideologies try to implement on earth the absolute and pure, of race or doctrine, and cannot tolerate the mellowness of nuance and tolerance. The craving for justice and compassion needs to be suppressed by terror. But sooner or later they will collapse for want of justice.

Theistic religions are not exempt from the need for terror to sustain the absolute, as exhibited in old Christian crusades and inquisition, and present Islamist fundamentalism, and terrorism, which have the appeal of returning to the purity of old, rejecting the niceties and decadence of democracy and diversity.

In Western society, Enlightenment ideals, inspired among others by Spinoza, have served to provide the pure, Platonic, and universal in reason and knowledge. In an earlier item in his blog (93) I noted the demise of the old culture of delving for the deep, the fundamental, the abstract, which is being replaced by the rush and race of the superficial. After that loss, what next will appear in order to satisfy the urge for the pure and perfect? Will there be a return to God, or a new ideology?

If you have the urge to aspire to perfection, and to feel special, significant, essential in life, does that make you a narcissist, or only if you need to be admired, celebrated for it? However that may be, how does one satisfy that urge?

Patricia de Martelaere saw three ways: art, love and God. The problem with God is that he does not answer or speak, and you cannot be sure he really exists and loves you. The problem with romantic love (*eros*) is that the loved one may cease to love you or may desert you. Art has the advantage that it is under your own control, if you have the talent for it. Unfortunately, the price you pay is that it is dead, not alive by itself. Yet for control freaks, seeking to achieve an essential life without risk, that may be the way. Perhaps that is why often artists (and philosophers) wind up alone, avoiding the risks of love.

Foucault, at the end of his struggle with pervasive and all-invasive powers of social structures, sought a way out in turning one's life into a work of art. How could that go?

De Martelaere said that death does not fulfil life but interrupts it, prevents one from rounding it off as a finished product, and that to foil death an artist (and, I would add, also an intellectual, scientist or entrepreneur) seeks to achieve a finished work, after which one can say: I achieved that before death could snatch it away.

How could this be related to the *imperfection on the move* that I advocate in this blog, and the idea that the only life after death is the life of others that one leaves behind?

For the artist (or intellectual, scientist, entrepreneur), after finishing a project there is always the next one to engage upon, which may not get finished and in any case is only a step in an ongoing series that will certainly never be finished.

Suppose one sees one's life not as a series of projects for oneself but as a contribution to an ongoing stream of life, where one's projects contribute to those of others to come. Then, may not the urge to feel essential in life be satisfied by making essential contributions to what may come, to the potential after life? But how does one know whether one's contribution is essential? That also is up to posterity to decide. All one can do is to strive for it to the best of one's capability and insight.

That is also what parents, especially mothers perhaps, do, in bringing up children as a project without end, contributing to the potential of posterity. And how about workers in health care, say? In their way they can feel essential in life.

In both Western and Eastern philosophy there is a tendency to reserve enlightenment for an elite of the initiated, the illuminated, the trained, the ascetic, in gaining access to a transcendent, elevated, absolute, supreme being (God, Brahman) or condition (Nirvana). If one renounces absolutes and embraces imperfection on the move, one can achieve freedom from self-obsession in ordinary life, in transcendence that is horizontal, in others, and immanent, during life.

In earlier workⁱ I defined religion as a connection with something higher than the self.ⁱⁱ That can be the other human being, or humanity, instead of God.

Here I consider an alternative, prompted by John Caputoⁱⁱⁱ, inspired by Kierkegaard. According to the latter, God is not ontological, does not refer to any thing that exists, but is a deed of faith, an act of existence. Faith in God entails the recognition that we are never more true to ourselves than when we lack the truth of who we are (Caputo, p. 93).

There is a connection, further back in the history of thought, with the church father Augustine's notion of Man 'on the way' (*homo viator*) to God.

Here, religion is a passion for the impossible, for what we reach for but will never reach, and that we call God.

Could this be connected with my thesis of 'imperfection on the move'? Could we call the horizon that we strive for, with passion, but will never reach, God?

What pleads for this is the consideration that to engage in the gamble of imperfection on the move we need to believe, to have faith in its value, or its truth, here taken as fidelity to our humanity or human potential. We cannot know this for certain. It is indeed a matter of faith in something beyond us and hidden. Compare this to the Augustinian notion of the hidden God (*deus absconditus*).

Here we reconnect with the notion of religion as connection, or dedication, to something higher, beyond ourselves.

I proposed that we engage in imperfection on the move to make the best use, according to our imperfect insight, of our talents.

I added that the creative challenge involved is part, perhaps the essence, of a flourishing life, for which we need to accept the suffering that it is likely to entail. Here I approach Nietzsche.

I also added that we need the other to oppose our views and to try and correct our prejudice in what we strive for and how we do it.

However, and here I deviate from established notions of God, the aim of the endeavour is to contribute not to a personal hereafter but to the hereafter of what we leave behind at our death.

So, if I were to call the horizon of the endeavour of imperfection on the move God, it would be far from traditional conceptions of God as an existing thing, a supreme being, let alone a personal being. Not a providential God. No life after death, no heaven. No theodicy; no divine justice. One could, however, pray to this non-existent God, as an

expression of doubt, hope or faith that we are doing the right thing, and perhaps as a consolation for the suffering we incur in it.

Would all this still make me an atheist?

ⁱ Bart Nooteboom, 2012, *Beyond humanism: The flourishing of life, self and other*, Palgrave-McMillan.

ⁱⁱ As according to the (contested) etymology of 'religion' as 'connection'.

ⁱⁱⁱ John D. Caputo, 2013, *Truth; Philosophy in transition*, Penguin.